The Misunderstanding Bystanders

Fifth in the series Words to the Cross - Mark 15:35-36

TWO WEEKS AGO AS I BEGAN THIS SERIES OF SERMONS WORDS TO THE CROSS, I ASKED YOU TO THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT THESE WORDS AND ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO SAID THEM. I HAVE FOUND THAT THE MORE I THINK ABOUT THEM THE MORE I REALIZE THAT HAD WE BEEN THERE ON CALVARY THAT DAY WE WOULD BE THE ONES SAYING THEM. THIS APPLIES PARTICULARLY TO THE PEOPLE IN QUESTION THIS MORNING, I INVITE YOU TO JOIN ME IN EXAMINING FIRST THEM AND THEN OURSELVES, TO SEE IF THERE IS ANY RELATIONSHIP.

BEFORE WE LOOK TO THESE PEOPLE, HOWEVER, I WANT TO THINK A MINUTE ABOUT ONE OF THE MOST PROFOUNDLY MOVING UTTERANCES OUR LORD MADE. IT WAS THE STATEMENT THAT PROMPTED THE BYSTANDERS TO CRY OUT THE TEXT FOR THIS MORNINGS SERMON. SHORTLY BEFORE HE DIED JESUS, IN WRETCHED AGONY AND PAIN IN HEART BREAK AND SORROW LIFTED HIS VOICE AND CRIED [ELOI, ELOI LAMA SABACTHANI ?] WHICH IS THE ARAMAIC FOR "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME". THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE FAMILIAR WITH YOUR BIBLES WILL RECALL THAT THIS PHRASE IS THE OPENING LAMENT OF THE 22 PSALM. THE ANCIENT JEWS, WHO'S HISTORY HAD BEEN ONE CONSTANT FLOW OF SUFFERING AND SORROW, REGARDED THIS PARTICULAR PSALM VERY HIGHLY. IT WAS POPULAR IN THE SNYAGOGUES AND ALL THE YOUNG PEOPLE MEMORIZED IT--JUST AS WE MEMORIZE THE 23 PSALM. AS A GOOD JEW, JESUS WOULD HAVE BEEN VERY FAMILIAR WITH THIS PSALM AND IN THIS DARKEST HOUR OF HIS LIFE HE DREW FROM IT TO EXPRESS HIS TREMENDOUS SORROW AND DEJECTION.

MY GOD, MY GOD WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME? AS WE SO FREQUENTLY DO JESUS LOOKED UPWARD QUESTIONINGLY AND ASKED HIS WHY. AND IN THIS QUESTION WE CAN FIND COMFORT IN KNOWING THAT EVEN OUR LORD SUFFERED SO BADLY THAT HE ASKED WHY. IN THAT SENTENCE WE KNOW THAT CHRIST TOO FELT THE SEARING AGONY OF SORROW. NOW WE KNOW THAT THERE IS NO DARK TUNNEL IN OUR LIVES THROUGH WHICH HE HAS NOT BEEN BEFORE US, NO HARD ROAD WHERE HE HAS NOT ALREADY WALKED WITH WOUNDED FEET.

PART OF THE ANXIETY WE ENDURE, IN A TIME OF SUFFERING OR DEATH, IS DUE JUST TO THE FACT THAT WE ARE FORCED TO DOUBT OUR FAITH, TO ASK GOD WHY/ WHY. WE WISH THAT OUR FAITH WERE STRONG ENOUGH BUT WHEN WE NEED ANSWERS THEY DON'T SEEM TO BE HANDY. (NEVER IN HIS WHOLE LIFE DID JESUS SO COMPLETELY INDENTIFY HIMSELF WITH HIS POOR, PUZZLED BRETHREN OF MANKIND AS AT THE CROSS. FOR HERE WE SEE THAT NOT ONLY HAS HE SUFFERED AS WE DO, BUT THAT HE TOO HAS FELT GNAWING DOUBT AND THE ANXIETY OF THE UNANSWERED QUESTION, (WHY HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN ME O GOD?) a despair in doubt WE NEED NOT FEAR, THERE IS NOWHERE THAT OUR LORD HAS NOT BEEN BEFORE US,/ THERE IS NOTHING WE MUST ENDURE, THAT HE HAS NOT ENDURED ALREADY. ELOI ELOI - LAMA SABACHTHANI.

pause

THIS WAS THE QUESTION THAT INSPIRED THE 5th WORD TO THE CROSS, BY PEOPLE WHO SOUND AND ACT VERY MUCH LIKE OURSELVES.

XXXX

MISUNDERSTOOD

IT WAS THESE PEOPLE THAT ~~SPOKE BACK~~ TO OUR LORD ON THE CROSS, THE BYSTANDERS, JUST THE AVERAGE JOES'. ~~AND IT WAS THESE PEOPLE THAT MISUNDERSTOOD~~ OUR LORD AND COMPLETELY MISSED THE POINT. LET US CONSIDER FOR A MINUTE WHETHER WE FIT IN THAT CATEGORY, WHETHER WE HAVE A TRUE UNDERSTANDING OF OUR RELATIONSHIP TO LORD AND TO OUR CHURCH, (OR WEHTER WE TOO HAVE MISSED THE POINT.

these bySTANDERS AT THE CROSS FAILED TO RECOGNIZE RELIGION FOR WHAT IT WAS. THEY MISTOOK GOD FOR ELIJAH. JUST LIKE THESE BYSTANDERS WE, EVEN IN THIS ENLIGHTENED DAY CONFUSE RELIGION WITH ITS FORMS, CHRISTIANITY WITH CHURCH MEMBERSHIP. THIS IS NOT ONLY TRUE HERE IN OUR CHURCH BUT ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL ALSO. HOLINESS, PIETY, CHRISTIANITY ARE ALL BOTTLED UP, IN OUR MINDS, IN CHURCH MEMBERSHIP ROLES. IF THIS POPULAR NOTION IS TRUE THEN AMERICA IS CERTAINLY ON THE INSIDE TRACK FOR AS A NATION AMERICA HAS NEVER BEEN SO RELIGIOUS. MAGAZINES AND NEWSPAPERS PELT US WITH THE JOYOUS NEWS THE RELIGION IS ENJOYING A REVIVAL IN OUR DAY. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IS INCREASING TWICE AS FAST AS THE INCREASE IN POPULATION. SOME OF THE BEST SELLING BOOKS OF RECENT YEARS HAVE BEEN THOSE WITH RELIGIOUS THEMES. NOT TOO LONG AGO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES SIGNED A BILL CHANGING THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE TO THE AMERICAN FLAG TO READ IN PART "ONE NATION UNDER GOD.") NEW CHURCHES ARE SPRINGING UP, EVANGELISTS ARE SAVING SOULS HAND OVER FIST, MAJOR DENOMINATIONS ARE TALKING ABOUT MERGING.

Church is imp. but not everything

IRONICALLY

BUT, ~~PARADOXICALLY~~, AS A NATION WE ARE EXPERIENCING A DECLINE IN MORALS. I SURELY DON'T NEED TO DOCUMENT THIS WITH MORE THAN A FEW SENTENCES. A RECENT MAGAZINE ARTICLE STATED SOME OF THE FACTS AND FIGURES AND I COPIED THEM DOWN "WE CAN RIGHTLY BOAST OF OUR MATERIAL ADVANCES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, BUT WE SHOULD NOT BLINK AT THE FACT THAT IT HAS LIKEWISE BEEN THE BLOODIEST PERIOD OF HUMAN HISTORY AND THAT UNIVERSAL DEATH HAS NOW BEEN MADE POSSIBLE...DURING THE PAST 50 years 63 MILLION HUMAN BEINGS WERE KILLED INTWO WORLD WARS....THE COST IN MONEY ALONE WAS MORE THAN A THOUSAND BILLION DOLLARS...." AND LATER ON IT REVEALS "THE UNITED STATES CAN NOW BOAST MORE DRUG ADDICTS THAN ALL OTHER WESTERN NATIONS COMBINED..AND MORE CHRONIC ALCHOLICS THAN THE REST OF THE ENTIRE WORLD!"

FORTY SIX PERCENT OF THE ARRESTS FOR MAJOR CRIMES IN THE UNITED STATES LAST YEAR WERE OF YOUNGSTERS UNDER 18 YRS. OLD, THIS IS FROM THE ANNUAL F.B.I. BULLETIN ON CRIME STATISTICS.

ADD TO THESE STATEMENTS, AND TO SO MANY MORE THAT COULD BE CITED, THE OVERHWELMING WAVE OF BEHAVIOR THAT HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN CONSIDERED IMMORAL. HERE THEN IS OUR PARADOX, MORE RELIGION, LESS MORALITY. CROWDED CHURCHES AND CROWDED JAILS.

WE CAN DRAW TWO IMPLICATIONS FROM THESE FACTS, EITHER THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIANITY AS SUCH IS IRRELEVANT AND IMPOTENT AS A STABILIZING SOCIAL FORCE, OR THE MILLIONS OF PERSONS WHOSE NAMES ADORN THE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP ROLES HAVE MISUNDERSTOOD THE POINT OF

CHRISTIANITY. OBVIOUSLY, IT IS TO THE LATTER THAT WE SHOULD DEVOTE OUR ATTENTION. IT STANDS TO REASON THAT IF MORE PEOPLE ARE JOINING THE CHURCH OUR CULTURE SHOULD LIKEWISE EXPERIENCE A RENEWAL OF MORALITY, PEACE AND LOVE.

THE BRUNT OF THE PROBLEM LIES SQUARELY IN THE FACT THE CHURCH MEMBERS, LIKE THE BYSTANDERS ON CALVARY, HAVE MISUNDERSTOOD JESUS CHRIST. IN ESSENCE MAKING A PUN OUT OF ALL HIS TEACHINGS. BY LOOKING AT THE CHRIST DYING ON A CROSS, WE KNOW THAT GOD IS INTERESTED IN SEEING THE CHURCH GO DOWN INTO THE VALLEY OF HUMAN NEED AND GETTING ITS HANDS DIRTY IN THE WORK OF SERVICE AND ITS CLOTHES TORN IN THE BATTLE AGAINST EVIL. ONE CANNOT READ THE LIFE OF CHRIST WITHOUT BEING IMPRESSED BY HIS INSISTANCE ON THE NECESSARY CONNECTION BETWEEN FAITH AND WORKS. Inter relatedness between beliefs and life

THE CALL OF JESUS CHRIST TO HIS CHURCH IS FOR IT TO BE THE ETHICAL FRAMEWORK OF SOCIETY. THE STABILIZING LEVELING INFLUENCE THAT NOT ONLY STRIVES AGAINST SOCIETIES EVILS BUT ALSO CONSTANTLY STRUGGLES TO BRING ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IS NOT WORTH ANYTHING UNLESS THIS MISSION IS UNDERSTOOD. HAVING ONE'S NAME ON THE ROLL IS NOTHING UNLESS THE INVIDIVUAL, NOT ONLY UNDERSTANDS THIS, BUT ALSO IS WILLING TO COMMIT HIMSELF TO ITS FULFILLMENT. HEREIN IS THE PROBLEM, CHURCH MEMBERS THEMSELVES SIMPLY HAVE EITHER MISUNDERSTOOD OR MOCKINGLY MADE A JOKE OUT OF THE BODY OF JESUS CHRIST.

At this point

WE DO WELL TO REMEMBER WHO IT REALLY WAS THAT KILLED JESUS. IT WAS NOT THE ROMAN SOLDIERS, OR THE GODLESS PAGANS OR THE CRUDE RUFFIANS, BUT THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF THE DAY. THE PHARISEES, SCRIBES, CHIEF PRIESTS AND THE CROWDS OF DEVOUT PIOUS JEWS WERE THE ONES THAT DEMANDED HIS DEATH. THE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE, THE ONES THAT MADE LONG PRAYERS, AND KNEW THEIR SCRIPTURES WELL, THE CHURCH MEMBERS CRUCIFIED OUR LORD. AND WHY, BECAUSE HE HIT THEM WHERE IT HURT, HE CALLED THEM PHONIES. HE NEVER HESITATED TO POINT HOW SENSELESS AND HYPOCIRTICAL WERE THEIR RULES AND TIRUAL, BECAUSE THEY HAD MISUNDERSTOOD THEM. HOW MEANINGLESS THE LAW WHEN THE SPIRIT HAD BEEN LOST. HE SPOKE THE HARSH TRUTH AND IT CUT THEM TO THE QUCIK, THEY COULD NOT STAND HIM, HE WAS DESTROYING THEIR RESPECTABILITY. SO THE CHURCH MEMBERS WHOSE MOST SACRED COMMANDMENTS TOLD THEM "THEY SHALL NOT KILL" DEMANDED HIS DEATH, AND IN JEST AND MOCKING GAVE HIM VINEGAR TO DRINK, AND IN CYNICAL NAIVETE TURNED HIS HEARTFELT PLEA INTO A PUN.

WOULD YOU AND I BE IN THE CROWD? WOULD WE TOO DEMAND HIS DEATH BECAUSE HE HAD INSULTED US? WOULD JESUS CHRIST LOOK AT OUR CHURCH, INTO OUR EYES SEARCHINGLY ONE BY ONE AND TELL US THAT WE HAD MISSED THE POINT. THAT WE HAD SIGNED THE ROLE, ATTENDED CHURCH, PARTICIPATED IN THE RITUAL OF WORSHIP BUT HAD FAILED TO CAPUTURE THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTIANITY. WOULD WE BE INFURIATED BY WHAT HE WOULD TELL US? OR COULD WE LOOK HIM STRAIGHT IN THE EYE KNOWING THAT HIS EXAMPLE OF LOVE HAD PERMEATED OUR LIVES,

THAT WE HAD DONE ALL IN OUR POWER TO SERVE HIM AS HE WOULD HAVE US SERVE. WOULD WE BE AMONG THOSE WHO MORNED AND WEPT AS HE DIED, OR WOULD WE ANXIOUSLY AWAIT HIS RIDDANCE?

THESE ARE THE QUESTIONS POSED BY THE RESPECTABLE BYSTANDERS WHO MISUNDERSTOOD OUR LORD. THEY ARE QUESTIONS WE ARE FORCED TO ASK OURSELVES AS WE NEAR THE OCCASION OF HIS CRUCIFIXION.

PERHAPS WE ARE MISTAKEN ABOUT JESUS, MAYBE WE FAIL TO RECOGNIZE HIM FOR WHAT HE REALLY IS. MOST OF THE TIME WE TEND TO THINK OF HIM AS A FRIEND OF CHILDREN, TENDER AND GENTLE, WHICH OF COURSE HE IS. NO ONE COULD DENY THESE ATTRIBUTES TO JESUS BUT IF THAT WAS ALL HE WAS HE HARDLY WOULD HAVE BEEN CRUCIFIED. THIS LINE OF THINKING HAS BEEN PUSHED FOR A LONG TIME, IN S.S. theology hymns & pictures. THE MOST POPULAR PICTURE OF OUR LORD, THE ONE ABOVE OUR ALTAR IS CERTAINLY A MASTERPIECE AND AN APPROPRIATE SYMBOL FOR OUR SANCTUARY. BUT AT TIMES IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE JESUS AS BEING ANY OTHER THAN THE ETHERIAL SOFTNESS PORTRAYED THEREIN, AND HERE IS OUR MISUNDERSTANDING. THE SAME MAN THAT SAID "SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME" FACED THRONGS OF ANGRY PEOPLE, LOOKING THEM SQUARELY IN THE FACE AND TOLD THEM THEY WERE HYPOCRITES. THE SAME JESUS THAT STOPPED TO ADMIRE THE LOVELINESS OF A FLOWER, BY BRUTE STRENGTH, OVERTURNED TABLES AND BODILY EJECTED MONEY CHANGERS FROM THE TEMPLE. THE SAME PERSON THAT ALLOWED A WOMAN TO WASH HIS FEET WITH HER HAIR WAS SPAT UPON, BEATEN, FELT NAILS DRIVEN THROUGH HIS HANDS.

JESUS CHRIST DOES NOT OFFER A WAY OF LIFE THAT IS SOFT, A PLEASANT EXISTENCE AND ASSURANCE THAT CAN BE PULLED OFF BY HAVING ONE'S NAME ON A CHURCH ROLE. IF WE THINK

OF OUR FAITH IN THESE TERMS WE TOO HAVE MISUNDERSTOOD HIM, WE TOO WOULD BE THE ONES TO CRY "CRUCIFY HIM."

THERE IS NO ROOM FOR SPINELESSNESS IN CHRISTIANITY. A LORD WHO WILLINGLY ENDURED THE HORROR OF CRUCIFIXION DEMANDS A COMMITMENT IF WE ARE TO BE HIS. HE MAKES DEMANDS OF US, DEMANDS THAT CANNOT BE FULFILLED BY APATHY BUT ONLY BY WHOLE HEARTED DEVOTION.

ST. AUGUSTINE, ONE OF THE FINEST MINDS THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN, WROTE 1600 YRS AGO AS HE STRUGGLED WITH CHRISTIANITY ("LORD, MAKE ME PURE, BUT NOT YET.") JESUS CHRIST, HOWEVER, MADE IT QUITE CLEAR THAT THERE IS NO ROOM FOR THIS ATTITUDE WHEN HE SAID ("HE WHO IS NOT FOR ME IS AGAINST ME.") CHRISTIANITY IS NOT SOMETHING THAT CAN BE IDLY WATCHED, IT IS EITHER LOVED OR HATED, EITHER EMBRACED COMPLETELY OR OUTRIGHTLY REJECTED. THERE IS NO MIDDLE GROUND, AND WE MISUNDERSTAND OUR LORD IF WE THINK THERE IS.

yet

MUCH OF OUR UNHAPPINESS AND DISASTISFACTION WITH OUR FAITH AND CHURCH IS IN OUR MODERATION AND CAUTION AND HESITATION. THE REASON, A MODERATE, CAUTIOUS, HESITANT CHRISTIAN HAS MISSED THE POINT. (There is the saying as a → PRES. KENNEDY USED A PHRASE IN HIS ACCEPTANCE SPEECH IN L.A. THAT HAS STUCK IN MY MIND AS A PLEA WE MIGHT MAKE TO EACH OTHER. ("DO NOT ASK your WHAT THE CHURCH CAN DO FOR ME BUT WHAT CAN I DO FOR THE CHURCH.") THIS IS THE COMMITMENT you you your A CRUCIFIED SAVIOR DEMANDS, (WE MUST ASK OURSELVES HAVE WE MADE IT, OR HAVE WE NOT UNDER* STOOD.

The

THE BYSTANDERS ON CALVARY MISUNDERSTOOD JESUS' PLEA: THEY TURNED HIS SNCERITY INTO A PUN. WE IN THIS CHURCH ARE IN THE MIDST OF A CRUCIAL UPHEAVAL. YOU HAVE ALL BEEN ASKED TO STAND UP AND REAFFIRM YOUR FAITH: AND IN SO DOING YOU HAVE BECOME MEMBERS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. BUT LET US NOT BE GUILTY OF MISUNDERSTANDING JESUS CHRIST BY MAKING THIS INITIAL ACT THE END OF THE AFFAIR. NOW AND IN THE COMING YEARS AND MON THS YOU WILL BE CALLED ON TO BACK UP THAT STAEMENT WITH ACTION.

MAY GOD GRANT US XXXX WISDOM THAT WE MAY FULLY UNDERSTAND THE TASK HE HAS ORDAINED US TO PERFORM. MAY HE GRANT US GRACE THAT FROM THIS TIME FORWARD WE MAY DEVOTE OURSELVES COMPLETELY TO HIS WILL.

IN CONCLUSION I WANT TO SHARE WITH YOU AN APPROPRIATE POEM THAT IS INSCRIBED ON THE WALL OF A CATHEDRAL IN LOUBECK, GERMANY:

Share with you

ALL I HAVE SAID IS SUMMED UP ELEGANTLY IN A POEM INSCRIBED IN THE WALL OF AN OLD CATHEDRAL IN LOUBECK GERMANY:

YOU CALL ME MASTER, AND OBEY ME NOT

YOU CALL ME LIGHT AND SEE ME NOT

YOU CALL ME WAY AND WALK NOT

YOU CALL ME LIFE AND DESIRE ME NOT

YOU CALL ME WISE AND FOLLOW ME NOT

YOU CALL ME FAIR AND LOVE ME NOT.

YOU CALL ME RICH AND ASK ME NOT

YOU CALL ME ETERNAL AND SEEK ME NOT

YOU CALL ME GRACIOUS AND TRUST ME NOT

YOU CALL ME NOBLE AND SERVE ME NOT

YOU CALL ME MIGHTY AND HONOR ME NOT

YOU CALL ME JUST AND FEED ME NOT

IF I CONDEMN THEE, BLAME NOT NOT" AMEN.